



November 28, 2011

Michigan House of Representatives  
State Capitol Building  
Lansing MI 48909

Dear Representative:

Thank you for your important and hard work on education issues this year. We are buoyed to see the work that you have done to improve our public schools, including the passage of tenure reform in June -- and the creation of the historic Education Achievement Authority by Governor Rick Snyder. We applaud the leadership on both sides of the aisle, and we recognize that the work being done to transform education in Michigan is far from over.

As a diverse coalition of state-wide and national organizations who are invested in and working on behalf of students, we share a firm belief that quality education for all students is paramount, regardless of school governance.

You will soon be asked to vote on Senate Bill 618, legislation that will expand charter schools. This legislation, introduced by Senator Phil Pavlov, is one piece of the puzzle for remaking public education in Michigan. But what our state needs most are additional high-quality school options for students.

The question we are asking is this:

- Should existing charter authorizers and operators who have a portfolio of schools that consistently perform at horribly low levels -- even compared to other schools with mostly low-income students -- deserve to automatically expand their number of schools without any accountability or responsibility for the Michigan students they are currently failing?

The answer, we believe, is obvious: Absolutely not. Charters - like any other public schools - should be held to high standards. We should have the tools to ensure their accountability in helping our students learn and succeed. Ensuring that we are only bringing forward high-quality charters is key to our students' and state's overall success.

This legislation poses a real opportunity to transform the delivery of quality education for students, that is, if rigorous accountability and oversight mechanisms are included. We applaud those charter authorizers that have stepped up to the plate to close down low-performing schools and recognize the difficulty in doing so. It takes years for a student to recover from a low-performing school; some never do. Focusing on bad schools after they've failed, wastes Michigan taxpayers' dollars and critical years of students' lives. We must be pro-active by including front-end quality provisions in the legislation. It's in the best interest of student learning and allows the focus to be on replicating models delivering high-quality schools - a wise investment of scarce resources. It would also reduce the number of schools that authorizers have to close which would ameliorate the impact of school closures on students, parents and staff.

The research shows that charter school performance in Michigan mirrors that of traditional public schools: some charter schools are doing amazing jobs; some schools are good to average; and some schools are performing at terribly low levels. Even when considering for poverty, there is dramatic variation in Michigan charter schools' quality. Thus, it's important that we support and encourage our strongest charter schools, while holding accountable our low-performers.

Senate Bill 618 has the potential to position Michigan as a place that welcomes high-performing charter operators, innovation and quality education, but only if amended to insist on upfront quality provisions that would encourage ALL authorizers to replicate only the highest-performing charter schools.

Thank you for your consideration and commitment to Michigan students.

Sincerely,

Michigan Democrats for Education Reform  
Progressives for Quality Public Schools  
Students First  
The Education Trust - Midwest